

Anyone involved with a frightening event may feel shock or distress. These reactions are often called trauma. You might feel trauma if any of these things happen:

- You saw or were involved in the event.
- You arrived on the scene of the event.
- You had a “near miss” or were almost involved.
- You knew or know others who were killed, harmed, or involved in some way.
- You know family or friends of victims.
- You have heard a lot about the event through media or friends.
- The event reminds you of other upsetting events in your life.

Trauma is a normal response to very uncommon events. You can't predict how you will react after a disaster or other scary event. Let yourself have your responses and feel your emotions. Ask for help when you need to.

Common Reactions to Trauma

Not everyone responds in the same way. Here are some reactions you might notice.

Thoughts

- Hard time concentrating
- Feeling confused or distracted
- Slower thinking than usual
- Blaming yourself for escaping the tragedy
- Feelings of danger, even in normally safe situations
- Reliving the event:
 - Thoughts or images you can't control
 - Bad dreams or nightmares
 - Flashbacks about the event

Emotions

- Anxiety or fear, even long after the event
- Irritable, restless, or over-excited
- Sad or moody; crying more than usual
- Helpless or hopeless feelings
- Numbed or detached emotions
- Feeling isolated from others

Physical Sense

- Headaches
- Nausea or upset stomach
- Easily startled at loud noises
- Fatigue or feeling slowed down

Behaviors

- Changes in activity levels, higher or lower
- More irritable behavior than usual
- Withdrawal, social isolation
- Avoiding things or places that remind you of the event
- Trouble sleeping
- Strong need to talk or read about the event

If you notice you are having some of these reactions, remember your response is normal. Right after a traumatic event, you will probably feel shaken, dazed, and confused. You may notice you are not acting as you usually would.

It is important to take care of yourself as best you can. Here are suggestions.

Taking Care of Yourself

You're Okay

- Remind yourself that you're having a normal response to a stressful situation.
- Give yourself permission to do whatever you need to do to take care of yourself. Your body and mind will tell you what you need to do.
- Get plenty of rest when you're tired. Don't force yourself to be active if you don't have the energy.

Talk It Out

- Talk to people as much as you need to. Reach out.
- You may feel a need to talk about the event over and over again. Call a friend or loved one who can listen. If you feel there is no one you can talk to, think about calling a crisis line or going to a crisis center. Other community resources may also be available. They are all there to help you.

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- Let yourself cry, rage, and express feelings when you need to.
- Try not to numb your feelings with alcohol or drugs. This will only make things harder.
- Spend time with others, even if you don't feel like talking. It can be comforting to know you're not alone. Try to find someone or someplace that feels safe and comforting to you, and spend time there.

Take It Easy

- Do things that feel good to you—take baths, read, exercise, watch television, spend time with friends and family, fix yourself a special treat— whatever feels right.
- Try not to make any major life decisions or big life changes right now. This is not a time to put pressure on yourself to do anything out of the ordinary. Focus on taking care of yourself.

The Process of Recovery

- Recovering from a scary event may take a long time. Feeling shaken or numb may last days, weeks, or longer. Reactions might last longer than you expect or want. It is impossible to know how long they will go on, but usually the reactions go away over time.
- If another stressful event happens while you are still recovering, your reactions may reappear for a while. This is perfectly normal.

When to Call for Help

Help from a counselor or mental health professional could be useful any time after the event. Get professional help right away if any of these happen:

- You think about killing yourself.
- You cannot carry out normal life tasks.
- Your fears keep you from returning to places or situations that remind you of the event.

If you or someone you know needs help, please call the University Neuropsychiatric Institute Crisis Line at 801-587-3000.

For more information about self-care after a traumatic event, call our Patient and Family Support social workers at 801-213-5699 or visit huntsmancancer.org/pfs.

Adapted from "Taking Care of Yourself after a Traumatic Event," University Counseling Center, University of Iowa